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PETRARCH'S LETTERS TO CICERO.

Georg Voigt in his *Wiederbelebung des klassischen Alterthums* speaks of Petrarch as *der Entdecker der neuen Welt des Humanismus*, and, in view of the part which Petrarch played in the Revival of Learning, these words of praise are not extravagant. In the catalogues which have come down to us from the Middle Ages one finds now and then the title of a Greek or Latin classic, and a few men of learning would seem to have taken some interest in reading these books; but long before Petrarch's day real knowledge of the works of antiquity was dead. Even Dante came but little under the influence of the new learning.

With Petrarch the new era begins. His energy and care in collecting and preserving those works of the past which were already known, his enthusiasm in bringing to light books which had fallen into oblivion, his sympathy with the classical spirit, and his power to inspire others gave the first impulse to the new movement and were potent factors in advancing it.

His interest in Latin literature dated back to his boyhood days, and is well illustrated by a story of his early life.

Petrarch's father, who was an advocate, intended to have his son take up the profession of law and with this object in view sent him to Bologna, but after a time, feeling that the young man was not advancing as rapidly as he expected, the father sought for the reason of his son's slow progress and found it in the shape of a large collection of the Latin classics concealed under Petrarch's bed. These were thrown unceremoniously into the fire, but the grief and anger which Petrarch showed, induced his father to save a Cicero and a Virgil from the flames, and revealed the depth of the young man's passion for Latin literature. This passion animated him through life, for in later years, he tells us in one of his letters, whenever on making a journey

he noticed a monastery near the road he invariably turned aside to see if he could discover a book not in his own collection. Not content with his own investigations he sent requests and urgent entreaties to friends and acquaintances in Italy, France, Germany and England for any books which could be found in the neighborhood of his correspondents. The works of Cicero were the special objects of his search, and by his indefatigable efforts he brought to light, among other things the Philippics of that author, some of his philosophical works, and the orations for Archias and for Milo.

The crowning event of Petrarch's life, however, lay in the discovery of a collection of Cicero's *Letters* in the cathedral library at Verona in 1345 A.D., and, although he was weary and ill at the time, he would not entrust the manuscript to other hands, but himself made a copy of it. He regarded the book as his most precious possession and so highly did he prize it that he never allowed a copy to be made of it, but he published the knowledge of his discovery to the world in a letter addressed to Cicero himself.

This letter possesses a double interest for us. It was written when Petrarch was full of the first joy of his discovery, and therefore fixes the date and the place at which Cicero's *Letters* were made known to the world again. It records also the first impressions which Petrarch received from reading the familiar letters which Cicero wrote to his intimate friends. He had read some of the orations and some of the philosophical works of Cicero. Now he took up the letters for the first time, and it is interesting to compare Petrarch's impressions with those which we form to-day, for we also usually read the writings of Cicero in the same order. His letter runs as follows:

FRANCIS PETRARCH SENDS GREETINGS TO M. TULLIUS
CICERO.

Thy letters sought long and earnestly, and found where I least thought to find them, I have read with the greatest eagerness. I have listened to thee, Marcus Tullius, as thou

didst talk of many matters, as thou didst lament many ills, as thou didst throw upon many subjects the transforming light of thine intelligence, and I, who had long known what sort of a guide thou hadst been to others, have at last understood what kind of a man thou wert to thyself. Do thou in turn, wherever thou art, listen to this one word, which is inspired by true love for thee, a word not now of advice but of regret, which one of the after world who is most devoted to thy memory has given utterance to not without tears. Thou who wert ever restless and full of anxiety, or that thou mayest hear again thine own words, O headstrong and unfortunate old man, why hast thou plunged into so many struggles and quarrels which would profit thee in no wise whatsoever? Where hast thou left the peace of mind which befitted both thine age and thy profession and thy fortune? What counterfeit glitter of fame has involved thee as an old man in wars where young men fought, and hurried thee, the sport of every blast of fortune, to a death unworthy of a philosopher? Alas! unmindful both of a brother's advice and of thine own wholesome precepts—many as they are—like a traveller by night waving a torch in the darkness, thou hast shown to those who should follow, the path upon which thou thyself hast so sadly slipped. I say nothing of Dionysius, I say nothing of thy brother and nephew, I say nothing, if thou dost not wish it, even of Dolabella himself, all of whom thou art now exalting to heaven with words of praise, and now abusing with unexpected maledictions. Perchance these acts of thine could be overlooked. I pass over Julius Cæsar also, whose well-tried clemency became a haven of refuge for those who attacked him. Furthermore I say nothing of Pompeius Magnus, with whom, through a certain tie of intimacy, thou didst seem to have power without limit. But what madness incited thee against Antony? It was love of the Republic, I suppose, the Republic which thou didst confess was already utterly ruined. But if it was true loyalty, if it was love of liberty which led thee on, a view which one may hold in the

case of so great a man, why so close an intimacy with Augustus? What reply wilt thou make, pray, to thy friend, Brutus? If it be true, he says,¹ that Octavius pleases thee, thou wilt not seem to have avoided a master, but to have sought a more friendly master. This unhappy event was reserved for thee, and this was the crowning misfortune in thy career, Cicero, that of this very man whom thou hadst praised so highly thou shouldst speak bitterly, I will not say because he did thee harm, but because he did not withstand those who were doing thee harm. I grieve at thy lot, my friend, I feel shame and pity at the thought of thy great mistakes; and now like this very Brutus I give no credit to those precepts, in which I know thou wert thoroughly versed. What profits it forsooth to teach others; what boots it to speak always of the virtues in the most fitting language, if meanwhile thou dost not listen to thyself? Ah! how much better it would have been for a philosopher, of all men, to have grown old in the country far from strife, while thinking as thou dost thyself say in one place, of the life everlasting, and not of this present brief existence; how much better not to have had the *fascēs*, not to have eagerly craved a triumph, how much better had a Catiline never excited thine anger. But of this we talk in vain. Farewell, forever, my Cicero. In the world above, on the right bank of the Athesis, in the city of Verona in Transpadane Italy, on the sixteenth day before the Kalends of the fifth month, in the year from the birth of that Christ whom thou didst not know, thirteen hundred and forty-five.

The first perusal of Cicero's *Letters* proved a shock to Petrarch. Could this vain and vacillating mortal, who taught men to be strong and temperate, while he himself was weak and passionate, be the Cicero who had thundered against a Catiline and an Antony, whose praise of philosophy had charmed even St. Augustine? But as Petrarch read the letters again a new light broke upon him. The

¹ In an extant letter to Cicero (*ad Brut.* I. 16, 1) which is probably spurious, however.

words of confidence which one pours into the ear of his "other self" should not condemn a man any more than the questionings of one's own heart. If Cicero's broad view of the future made him hesitate when a narrow-minded man saw only the straight path of duty before him, yet in the end Cicero followed duty, and at least his genius was still a source of inspiration and life, and the recognition of this last fact inspired Petrarch to the composition of another letter to Cicero six months after the one already given.

FRANCIS PETRARCH SENDS GREETING TO M. TULLIUS
CICERO.¹

If my former letter offended thee, for what thy friend in the *Andria* says, as thou thyself art wont to remark, is true, that "complaisance maketh friends, truth begetteth hatred." listen to that which may in part appease the anger of thy soul, and let not truth always be hateful in thine eyes, for we are angry at true words of blame, we are pleased by true words of praise. It is true, Cicero, and let me say it with thy consent, that thou didst live as a man, thou didst speak as an orator, thou didst write as a philosopher. It was thy life with which I found fault, not thy talent nor thine eloquence; in fact I wonder at the one, I am lost in admiration of the other. And yet in thy life I find nothing lacking save steadfastness and the love of repose, which belongs of right to a philosopher's life, and avoidance of civil wars — since freedom was dead and the Republic already buried amid the sorrows of its adherents.

See in what a different way I treat thee from the way in which thou didst treat Epicurus in many places, but in particular in the work, *De Finibus*.² For thou dost everywhere approve of his life, while thou dost ridicule his claims to talent. I ridicule thee in no wise, still, as I have said, I feel a compassion for thee in view of thy life, I congratulate thee upon thy genius and thine eloquence. O most exalted

¹ *De rebus familiaribus* XXIV., 4.

² For instance, *De Fin.* II., 80.

father of Roman eloquence, not I alone, but all of us who are adorned with the beauties of the Latin tongue, render thee our thanks ; for we refresh our fields from thy streams, we frankly confess that we have been directed by thy guidance, aided by thine opinions, and illumined by thy light ; that finally under thine auspices, so to say, we have gained this power and inspiration to write, however small it may be. Another has come into our lives also, as a guide upon the path of poetry ; since necessity called for one whom we might follow as he advanced with the free step of the poet, a leader too (in prose) of measured tread she sought, one whose speech, one whose songs, we might admire, since if both of you will pardon me, neither was a master in both prose and poetry. He is no match for thee in breadth of vision nor thou for him in the perception of subtleties. Perchance I am not the first to say this, however deeply I feel it ; in fact one expressed this opinion before I did, or rather he said the sentiment had been expressed by others—a great man, too, Annæus Seneca,¹ of Cordova, from whom as this very man complains, not thine old age indeed, but the fury of the civil wars took thee. He *could* have seen thee, but he *did* not see thee ; still he was an enthusiastic eulogist of thy works and of the works of the other writer referred to above. In his pages therefore each person circumscribed by his own limitations in the way of eloquence is bidden to yield to thee, his contemporary, and to take his place among the many. But I torment thee with curiosity ; who, pray, is this leader thou dost ask ? thou knowest the man, if only thou dost remember his name. It is Publius Virgilius Maro, a citizen of Mantua, of whom thou didst prophesy illustrious things. For when, as we read in the books, after admiring a certain juvenile little work of his, thou hadst inquired who the author was, and hadst thyself, already an old man, seen him, who was a

¹ Seneca, the rhetorician, was born in 54 B. C., *i. e.*, eleven years before Cicero's death.

youth, thou wert delighted, and from the inexhaustible fountain of thine eloquence, thou didst render him a tribute, combined it is true with praise of thyself, yet well-founded and glorious and honorable. For thou didst say: "Rome's second great hope." And this saying heard from thy lips, pleased him in such a degree, and remained so firmly in his memory, that twenty years afterward, when thou hadst been long removed from the affairs of men, he placed it in his divine work in exactly the same words, and had it permitted thee to see this work, thou wouldst have rejoiced to think that from the first flower thou hadst foreseen so unerringly the fruit destined to come. Likewise thou wouldst have congratulated the Latin Muses because they had either left a doubtful victory to the haughty Greeks, or wrested a sure one from them; for each opinion has its sponsors. I doubt not that thou, if from thy books I have learned thy mind, which I seem to myself to know as if I had lived with thee, I doubt not that thou, I say, wilt be the champion of the latter view, and that as thou hast given to Latium the palm in oratory,¹ so thou wilt in poetry, and that thou wilt have already bidden the *Iliad* to yield to the *Æneid*, which concession from the very beginning of Virgil's work, Propertius, did not hesitate to demand. For when he contemplated the beginnings of the Pierian work, what he thought of them and what he hoped, he proclaimed openly in these verses:

"I cry you, yield ye Roman writers, yield ye Greeks;
An offspring greater than the *Iliad* is born?"²

So much for the second Latin leader in eloquence and the second hope of mighty Rome, now I return to thee. What I think of thy life, what of thy genius thou hast heard. Thou art waiting to hear of thy books, what fortune has befallen them, to what extent they are admired, whether it be by the common people or by the learned. There are extant then noble works of thine which we are

¹ *Tusc. Disp.* I., 3. ² *Prop.* III. 26, 65-6.

able, let me not say, to read through, nay not even to enumerate. The fame of thy deeds is widespread, and thy name is great and fills the ears of men; but the studious are very few in number, whether the cause lie in the sternness of the times or in the dullness and sluggishness of men's minds, or what I the rather think, in the greed for gain which drives the thoughts of men toward other ends. Therefore some of thy books, unless I am deceived, have without doubt been lost, perhaps hopelessly, to us who live to-day; to my great grief, to the great shame of our generation, to the great loss of posterity. For it has not seemed shameful enough to neglect the cultivation of our own talents, so that coming generations receive therefrom nothing of profit, but we must needs bring to nought the fruit of thy labor and of that of thy countrymen by a neglect utterly cruel and intolerable. For what I lament has happened in the case of thy books and in the case of many works of illustrious men. As my remarks just now were concerning thy books, these are the titles of those whose loss is the more noteworthy: the *De Re Publica*, the *De Re Familiari*, the *De Re Militari*, the *De Laude Philosophiae*, the *De Consolatione*, and the *De Gloria*, although with reference to this last work, there is rather an uncertain hope than a fixed despair.² Nay we have lost large parts even of thine extant works, so that, just as if they had been overwhelmed in a great struggle by oblivion and neglect, we must mourn for our leaders, not only dead but also mutilated or lost. For this state of things, which we suffer in the case of many other books, exists especially with reference to the *Academica* and the books upon the *Orator* and the *Laws*, which have survived in so mutilated and disfigured a condition, that it would really have been better for them had they perished.

Now thou dost wish to hear of the condition of the city

² A manuscript which he believed to be one of the *De Gloria* Petrarch had loaned to a friend. It was not returned, and no manuscript of the work has been found since that time.

of Rome and of the Roman State, to learn what the state of the fatherland is, to know in what degree the citizens are harmonious, to whom the control of affairs has fallen, by what hands the reins of government are held—whether wisely managed or not; whether the Danube and the Ganges, the Ebro and the Nile and the Don are our boundary lines; or has some leader risen “To limit our sway by the Ocean, our fame by the stars”¹ or “To extend our domain beyond the Garamantes and the Indians,”² as says that Mantuan friend of thine. I surmise that thou wilt hear most eagerly these things and things like them; for thy loyalty increases this natural eagerness and thy love for the fatherland, leading even to thy ruin, is known to every one. But it may be better to say nothing. For believe me, Cicero, if thou shalt have heard in what condition our affairs are, tears will fall from thine eyes in whatever portion of the world above or the world below thou dost chance to be. Farewell forever. In the world above, upon the left bank of the Rhone in Transalpine Gaul in the same year, on the 16th day before the Kalends of January.

FRANK ABBOTT.

¹ Virg. *Aen.* I., 287.

² Virg. *Aen.* VI., 794.